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Differences between 116 graduate and undergraduate women, representing 4 generations (i.e., Baby Boomers, Transitionals, Generation Xers, and Millennials), were studied to categorize earliest awareness and definitions of commitment in relationships. More than 63% of participants in each generation viewed relationship commitment in terms of constraints rather than attractions.

Keywords: generation, commitment, couples counseling

Even as marriage has become a highly romanticized institution, cohabitation rates are increasing and single parenthood has become more acceptable, leaving marriage a largely voluntary institution (Cherlin, 2010; Luscombe, 2010; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Since the early 1990s, *commitment* has become a buzzword among marriage and family scholars (M. P. Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1992). In more recent years, an understanding of commitment has become perhaps even more relevant because new counselors and human service workers continue to be trained.

Course work in human development across the life span is required by most counselor training programs, accrediting bodies, and licensures (Engels et al., 2010). A component of that course work is learning about the typical as well as the statistically unusual characteristics of individuals, couples, and families across the life span (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005). However, changes in U.S. culture compel the counseling field to clarify the differences in typical characteristics and belief structures of age groups such as the Baby Boomers or Millennials, acknowledging differences in areas such as the desire to marry, the desire to have children, and ideas about commitment to significant others and marriage partners (Wang & Taylor, 2011). Counselors educated in generational attitudes toward commitment can be more responsive to clients from different age groups.

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COMMITMENT

Commitment is defined as feeling that one's romantic relationship is permanent (Leik & Leik, 1977; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and entails aspects of both attractions and constraints (D. J. Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Leik & Leik, 1977). Following in the vein of social exchange theory, *attractions* are defined as the subjective assessment of rewards outweighing costs in a relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Attractions vary in each relationship and are not always rational.

Constraints encompass moral, social, and legal barriers having to do with staying in or exiting from a relationship (M. P. Johnson et al., 1999; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Also referred to as *moral commitment* and *structural commitment* (M. P. Johnson et al., 1999), this relationship dimension is reflected in many wedding affirmations that include the life-oriented vows "as long as we both shall live," for example, and entails a desire to be generally consistent and finish what one has begun.

Although gender differences in commitment have been discussed, there is still much to learn about particular variations in women's commitment. Women have historically been more likely to define their commitment in terms of moral commitment, but this might change for younger women who fully believe in egalitarianism in romantic relationships and marriage and who have been socialized to sacrifice less (Corra, Carter, Carter, & Knox, 2009; Surra, Boettcher-Burke, Cottle, West, & Gray, 2007). To date, however, studies concerning women's generational differences have largely been concerned with women's attitudes about work and family life balance, and the commitment literature has paid virtually no attention to age (Byrd, 2009; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Smola & Sutton, 2002).

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN WOMEN'S VIEWS OF COMMITMENT

A small number of studies address generational differences in how individuals come to view romantic commitment (Corra et al., 2009; Pinkham, 1997; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), although little attention was devoted to gender differences in these studies. Additionally, we found no studies including the generation nestled between the Baby Boomers and Generation Xers (i.e., individuals born between the late 1950s and the late 1960s). Barone (2008) suggested that this "Transitional" group represents a melding of both Baby Boomer and Generation X values.

Paul (2002), Pinkham (1997), Smola and Sutton (2002), and Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) have described the values of Baby Boomers and Generation Xers. Although there is still much to be learned about a more recent group, the Millennials, counselors know that they find work–family life balance to be essential (Smola & Sutton, 2002) and that they tend to take less normative

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paths toward marriage (Surra et al., 2007). Many Millennials see cohabitation as a prescription for making marriage work, although marriage and children are still worthy goals of this generation (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Wang & Taylor, 2011).

Generational differences are a lens of sorts, filtering life experiences into what relationships ultimately become (Corra et al., 2009; Pinkham, 1997; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). Our interest was to study the trends of generational groups as they viewed attractions and constraints. Because women are highly influential in the direction romantic relationships take (Stanley & Markman, 1992), we decided to study the differences in the views of women representing four generational age groups, namely, Baby Boomers (individuals born between 1948 and 1957), Transitionals (individuals born between 1958 and 1967), Generation Xers (individuals born between 1968 and 1982), and Millennials (individuals born between 1983 and 1992).

METHOD

The purpose of our study was to explore differences between four generations (i.e., Baby Boomers, Transitionals, Generation Xers, and Millennials) of graduate and undergraduate women with regard to their earliest views and definitions of commitment regarding heterosexual romantic relationships. We conceptualized qualitative themes in terms of attractions and constraints based on the commitment literature (D. J. Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Leik & Leik, 1977).

Participants

Our criterion sample consisted of 116 graduate and undergraduate women in counseling departments at two universities in the southwestern United States. The sample is a subsample from a larger sample (N = 163) of graduate and undergraduate students that also included men in those counseling departments. Participants were asked to participate (through class announcements) and then voluntarily answered our online survey. Thus, our sample is in no way representative of a larger population. The announcement requesting participation in the survey was made to approximately 450 students. In asking students to participate, we did not provide any incentives because participation in the survey was meant to be kept fully anonymous.

Participants were initially asked to identify their relationship statuses, and we delimited the current research study to those female participants identifying themselves as single (19%), in a committed heterosexual relationship (23%), or married (58%). The ethnic breakdown of the participants was as follows: European American (64%), Hispanic (20.5%), African American (8.5%), mixed ethnicity (3.4%), and other (3.6%). With respect to generational status, 23.3% of the participants were Baby Boomers, 20.7% were Transitionals, 23.3% were Generation Xers, and 32.7% were Millennials. Relationship statuses for each

generation were also noted because relationship status may influence views on commitment more than generation (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007; Surra et al., 2007). Only 15.8% of Millennials were married, whereas the majority of Baby Boomers (88.9%), Transitionals (79.2%), and Generation Xers (66.7%) were married. The generational designation and relationship status of participants are provided in Table 1.

Procedure

An Internet survey design was used to answer the following research questions: (a) How do various generations (i.e., Baby Boomers, Transitionals, Generation Xers, and Millennials) identify their earliest awareness about the concept of commitment? and (b) How do various generations define commitment in their own relationships?

Research design. We adopted a social constructionist paradigm (Berger & Luckmann, 2007), believing that an individual's knowledge of commitment is socially constructed and is thus subjective, evolutionary, and negotiated as a result of social interactions (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Using a web-based survey design, we sought to learn about participants' values regarding a certain phenomenon (i.e., commitment) and the meaning they attach to that phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) by asking open-ended questions. Because participants typed their responses in text boxes and were not limited to the number of words they could include, we found responses to the questions we analyzed to be rich in intensity and emotional content.

Instrument. The questions used in the current study were developed through an extensive review of the commitment literature (Kirk, 2007) and were also informed by the Couples' Commitment Inventory (CCI; Kirk, Eckstein, Serres, & Helms, 2007). The CCI has been used in previous investigations (Kirk et al., 2007; Nelson, Kirk, Ane, & Serres, 2011) and is based on the ideas put forth by Leik and Leik (1977) and M. P. Johnson et al. (1999) that commitment is

TABLE 1

Generational and Relationship Statuses of Participants

	Single		In a Committed Heterosexual Relationship		Married	
Group	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Millennials (ages 18–25, *n* = 38)	14	36.8	18	47.4	6	15.8
Generation Xers (ages 26–40, *n* = 27)	4	14.8	5	18.5	18	66.7
Transitionals (ages 41–50, *n* = 24)	3	12.5	2	8.3	19	79.2
Baby Boomers (ages 51–60, *n* = 27)	1	3.7	2	7.4	24	88.9

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multidimensional and must be understood as such. In allowing participants to answer open-ended questions about commitment, the inventory also goes beyond the normative answers that are received in many scaled commitment inventories (Leik & Leik, 1977). Ultimately, 11 open-ended questions were used for the Internet survey and were concerned with how individuals come to view commitment in romantic relationships. For these questions, participants were given text boxes without word limits to type their answers, so that their answers would be complete, in-depth, and narrative in nature.

Data collection. A survey company (www.freeonlinesurveys.com) was used to set up the CCI in an Internet format. Participants received an e-mail requesting their participation in the survey and directing them to the link provided to take the survey. Additionally, requests for participation were sent via a university department electronic mailing list and professors; students were told that the survey was about their views of commitment in romantic relationships.

When logging into the Internet survey, participants received information regarding informed consent, which assured them that their responses were anonymous and confidential. After all surveys were completed, the survey company collected the survey responses and aggregated them into an Excel file, as well as an HTML file, which contained all questions with all respective answers for the survey. Personal e-mail addresses of participants were not reported to the researchers (the authors of this article).

Data analysis. We began analysis by reviewing the Excel file provided by the survey company. We focused on two of the 11 open-ended questions: (a) What was your earliest awareness about the concept of commitment when you were growing up? and (b) How would or do you define commitment as you imagine it in your own marriage/relationship? We examined the written narratives of participants regarding their thoughts about socialization experiences and commitment as well as their own definitions of commitment, identifying themes for each question.

Initially, the open-ended responses were analyzed using the method of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After each researcher categorized all the responses, the research team compared the individual results and agreed to cluster answers into umbrella categories of attraction-based commitment or constraint-based commitment. The efforts of the researchers were exhaustive, and multiple discussions occurred regarding the varying ways of conceptualizing commitment into these two distinctive categories. The Excel file was color coded to denote which responses were attraction based and which responses were constraint based. Generational status was also coded by color to determine any differences in the age groups.

Ultimately, constraint-based commitment (regarding earliest awareness of commitment) referred to responses that were God centered or were reflective of "following the rules" or a parent's example. Constraint-based commitment that regarded how participants defined commitment in their own relationships

included the aforementioned categories as well as obligations a woman might have in a relationship. Attraction-based commitment for both questions included statements about how commitment has the ability to make one happy or unhappy in a relationship. Nonnormative statements about commitment being easily broken were also categorized as attraction-based commitment. All the researchers individually checked each case and reevaluated the code assigned during two more rounds of analyses. The research team engaged in further discussion regarding cases of disagreement until consensus was reached.

Trustworthiness of the data. Researcher bias, common in constructivist research (Glaser, 2002), is a threat to internal credibility that may occur in the data collection, analysis, or interpretation phase (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). This threat was initially reduced through the use of an Internet survey, which does not allow researchers to untenably affect a study. Through the analysis and interpretation phases, we discussed the influence of our respective backgrounds, generation (i.e., Generation X and Baby Boomer), theoretical orientation, and training (i.e., counselor education, marriage and family therapy, and sociology). Multiple rounds of analysis were conducted in which each researcher evaluated and reevaluated the coding, checking each case and discussing any points of disagreement. The initial interrater approach to data analysis, coupled with the revisiting of the raw data, may have increased the overall trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS

The majority of women across the generations in our sample viewed commitment as a constraint, both in their earliest awareness of commitment (n = 86) and in their personal definitions of commitment (n = 84). See Tables 2 and 3 for frequency of each theme by generation. When discussing their earliest awareness of commitment, the majority of women who saw commitment as a constraint reflected on following the rules, saying that "it's just something you do," "that it is for life," or that it means "sticking it out." Others discussed parents' or grand-

TABLE 2

Earliest Awareness of Commitment

	Attraction Based		Constraint Based		Combination	
Group	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Millennials (ages 18–25, n = 38)[a]	7	18.4	24	63.2	4	10.5
Generation Xers (ages 26–40, n = 27)[b]	4	14.8	22	81.5	0	0.0
Transitionals (ages 41–50, n = 24)	6	25.0	17	70.8	1	4.2
Baby Boomers (ages 51–60, n = 27)[b]	2	7.4	23	85.2	1	3.7

[a]Three cases were unusable. [b]One case was unusable.

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TABLE 3

Personal Definitions of Commitment

	Attraction Based		Constraint Based		Combination	
Group	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Millennials (ages 18–25, *n* = 38)[a]	11	28.9	24	63.2	2	5.3
Generation Xers (ages 26–40, *n* = 27)[b]	3	11.1	21	77.8	1	3.7
Transitionals (ages 41–50, *n* = 24)	5	20.8	16	66.7	3	12.5
Baby Boomers (ages 51–60, *n* = 27)	3	11.1	23	85.2	1	3.7

[a]One case was unusable. [b]Two cases were unusable.

parents' longevity in marriage, sometimes despite difficult times or hard work. For example, Emma, a Millennial in a committed relationship, said, "Commitment was something that you earned and have to work to keep. I learned this from my parents." (*Note*. Names used in the Results section of this article are fictitious.)

When looking across the generations, we found that Baby Boomers and Generation Xers were most likely to think of commitment in terms of constraints for both questions we analyzed. For example, Molly, a married, African American Baby Boomer, said, "I define it as a[n] understanding between the both of us that our marriage vows are sacred. I believe that our actions must be based on what is good for the relationship rather than good for the individual." Baby Boomers who described their earliest awareness of commitment as constraining were most likely to reference their parents' relationships, whereas Generation Xers were more likely to discuss following the rules.

Although the majority of women across all generations discussed their commitment mostly in terms of constraints, Transitionals and Millennials were more likely to view both their earliest awareness of commitment and their own definitions of commitment in terms of attractions or a combination of attractions and constraints. For example, regarding her earliest awareness of commitment, Hannah, a Hispanic Millennial who was in a committed relationship, said, "[I learned] that for the right person it is not hard to commit, especially if you really want it." Sarah, a married, Hispanic Transitional, said regarding her definition of commitment, "Your spouse is your best friend and first consideration." Both Transitionals and Millennials were likely to discuss their earliest awareness of commitment in terms of negative expectations. For example, Emily, a Millennial (no ethnicity identified) who was in a committed relationship, said about her earliest awareness of commitment that "if it gets hard [you] leave." However, when discussing definitions of commitment in their own relationships, Transitionals and Millennials were upbeat. For example, Caroline, a Hispanic Millennial in a committed relationship, said about her own definition of commitment, "I would imagine it like a best friend you go through life with who you can't live without."

DISCUSSION

Although the data obtained are specific to the participants of our study, we compared our findings with those results found in a national study conducted by Wang and Taylor (2011) and found some points of similarity. Wang and Taylor reported that Millennials say that the main purpose of marriage is mutual happiness and fulfillment. For instance, in our study, Hannah, a Hispanic Millennial who was in a committed relationship, noted the following regarding her earliest awareness of commitment: "[I learned] that for the right person it is not hard to commit, especially if you really want it."

Conversely, our results seem to contrast with a study from the Pew Research Center (as cited in Wang and Taylor, 2011), which reported that 66% of Baby Boomers say divorce is preferable to staying in an unhappy marriage. The Baby Boomers in our study viewed commitment as a constraint, indicating that commitment is a promise to be taken seriously. This difference may be attributed to our sample being made up of entirely of women. It has been said that commitment comes more naturally for women than for men (Fincham et al., 2007; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). Women are socialized to sacrifice (Hui, Lindsey, & Elliott, 2007); have traditionally needed the economic stability that men can bring to marriage (Nock, 1995); and are highly influential in bringing clarity, unity, and emphasis to values and practices within relationships (Hui et al., 2007; Stanley & Markman, 1992).

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELING

Despite changes in the acceptability of divorce, the majority of women (more than 63%) in each generation viewed relationship commitment in terms of constraints, with many participants citing what they were taught in their families of origin. This finding is in accordance with transgenerational approaches to family therapy that attend "specifically to family relational patterns over decades" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008, p. 175). Counselors adhering to this approach will often use genograms (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985) to facilitate discussion of patterns in beliefs and relationships that have been passed down through generations. Consider the following vignette. (*Note*. The clients' names and some details have been altered to protect client confidentiality.)

> Mary and Bill, both Generation Xers, sought counseling because of increasing minor conflicts in their marriage. Their counselor asked them to create a family tree going back three generations on each side, adding symbols to designate relationships (e.g., marriages, divorces, close bonds, and conflicts) among family members. Using the genogram as a visual aid, Mary and Bill discussed what messages they each had received about marriage from their respective families. Bill's side of the family had never experienced a divorce. His view of commitment was "you stay together . . . no matter what." In

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contrast, Mary's parents had divorced when she was young. Both of her parents remarried a few years later and have since been happily married for 15 and 18 years, respectively. Her maternal grandparents had divorced, remaining split for 4 years, but they eventually remarried each other. Mary's view of commitment involved working on the relationship itself. Mary and Bill then discussed how their differing views of commitment—one as a constraint and the other as an attraction—had led to conflict in the past. Their counselor helped them to see that they both viewed their marriage as a priority, and he encouraged them to build on this strength by demonstrating this priority to each other in everyday interactions.

Although insights gained from genograms are beneficial in couples counseling, women who view commitment in terms of attraction, particularly Transitionals (25%) and Millennials (18.4%), may require a more directive approach. Women who hold an attraction-based view of commitment are more likely to examine the ratio of positive to negative aspects in their relationships. In his research on the prediction of divorce or marital stability, John Gottman referred to an "emotional bank account" (Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 80). Couples who turn toward each other build up emotional "savings" or goodwill that allows them to get through times of conflict. Because the good outweighs the bad, the couple is likely to stay together. Regarding the case vignette, the discussion of ways to demonstrate how Mary and Bill prioritize the marriage to each other should be extended into action. Each time Bill shows his priority by giving Mary a kiss and asking her about her day prior to turning on the television when he comes home from work, he makes a deposit in her emotional bank account. Mary and Bill can also be taught ways to build "love maps" (i.e., important information about a partner's life including likes and dislikes; Gottman & Silver, 1999, p. 48) for each other, as well as other ways of expressing fondness. Gottman and Gottman (2008) also pointed out the need for five positive exchanges for every negative interaction. As Mary and Bill build a positive base for their marriage, they are better prepared to deal with disagreements. When he later refuses to go out with her friends from work, she is able to maintain perspective. She is able to see that he prioritizes the marriage in other ways. She may be annoyed, but she no longer feels hurt and angry as she may have in the past. There are enough positive feelings to offset the conflict.

Counselors who wish to learn more about this approach should refer to Gottman and Gottman's (2008) sound marital house theory. In Gottman and Gottman's approach, counselors teach couples social skills for dialoguing about points of conflict and how to build their friendship as a basis for effectively repairing their relationship after a fight. In the case of Mary and Bill, their counselor would teach them both how to process their disagreements and how to regain a sense of closeness afterward.

We propose that the use of genograms and Gottman and Gottman's (2008) sound marital house approach will prove beneficial for counseling Baby Boomer, Transitional, Generation Xer, and Millennial couples alike. The combination of techniques validates the impact of beliefs passed down through generations and builds a stronger base of attraction to fortify commitment. Thus, we believe that integrating concepts from these transgenerational and cognitive behavior approaches will reach couples with both constraint-based and attraction-based views of commitment.

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